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JESUS AS A PROPHET.

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THAT Jesus was a prophet was a fact recognized by his contemporaries. The Samaritan woman at Jacob's well said to him : "Sir, I perceive that thou art a prophet" (John 4 : 19). The blind man who washed in the pool of Siloam at the bidding of Jesus, and came away with sight restored, said, when asked his opinion of him that had opened his eyes : "He is a prophet" (John 9 : 19). The Pharisees hesitated to lay violent hands upon him, because they feared the multitudes, with whom he had the name and reputation of a prophet (Matt. 21 : 46). The two disciples who, without recognizing him, talked with him on the way to Emmaus after his resurrection called him "Jesus of Nazareth, which was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people" (Luke 24 : 19).

Nor was this estimate of Jesus out of harmony with the thought and purpose of the Father in reference to him ; for, as Peter declared to the people in one of the porches of the temple court, after healing the lame man at the Beautiful Gate, he was the culmination and completion of the long line of prophets that began with Moses, and, as such a prophet, had been promised by God himself (Acts 3 : 22).

It is, however, not out of place to ask in what respects Jesus, as the last and greatest of the long line of prophets like Moses, resembled those that went before him. The reply will be that, while he was more and greater than any other of the prophets, as the son is greater than the servant, as the God-man must be more than the man of God, yet, in the essentials of the prophetic character and work, he was as his brethren, being made, in this respect also, like unto them.

The essential and characteristic matters for a prophet were,

(1) that he should be a messenger sent by God ; (2) that he should speak the words he had received from God to utter ; (3) that he should be a man of his times, and have a message for the time in which he appeared, and the people to whom he was sent ; (4) that his aim should be to fit the nation for the coming of the kingdom of God ; (5) that he should proclaim the coming of this kingdom, and (6) that he should declare the consequences that would follow according as men did, or did not, prepare themselves for the coming of God's kingdom.

All these things are seen in Jesus and his work.

First, he was surely a messenger sent by God. "I am come down from heaven, not to do mine own will, but the will of him that sent me," he said at Capernaum, when speaking of the true bread from heaven (John 6 : 38). "If any man willeth to do his will," he declared on one occasion in the temple, "he shall know of the teaching, whether it be of God, or whether I speak from myself" (John 7 : 17). His emphatic words to the Jews at Jerusalem who sought to kill him because he had healed on the Sabbath were : "Ye have not his word abiding in you ; for whom he sent, him ye believe not" (John 5 : 38). These utterances, which are only a few among many of like import, show that Jesus was in the world, because he had been sent by God with a message to give to men on God's behalf, with God's truth to tell, which was to be accepted and believed because it was from God.

Secondly, Jesus spoke always to men the words he had received from God.

He said of himself to the Jews at Jerusalem on one occasion : "When ye have lifted up the Son of man, then shall ye know that I am he, and that I do nothing of myself, but as the Father taught me, I speak these things" (John 8 : 28) ; and a little later, on the same occasion : "Now ye seek to kill me, a man that hath told you the truth, which I heard from God" (John 8 : 40). Still more emphatically, just before his last passover, he said : "I spake not from myself ; but the Father which sent me, he hath given me a commandment, what I should say and what I should speak. . . . The things therefore which I speak, even as the Father hath said unto me, so I speak" (John 12 : 49-50).

To no prophet who ever taught God's truth to man did the word of the Lord more truly come, according to his own testimony, than to the prophet of Nazareth.

Thirdly, Jesus was a man for his time, and had a message for the time in which he appeared, and the people to whom he was sent. He came as the man whom his time desperately needed, as the one last hope of the nation that had stoned and killed the prophets who had been sent by God to this rebellious and disobedient people before him. He came as the beloved son who surely could, if such a thing were still possible at all, call back the nation to its loyalty to Jehovah, and thus secure for it its glorious promised destiny. If he should fail, the day of the nation would be turned into darkest night (Matt. 21: 33-41; Luke 22: 9-16). He came, therefore, to a time which needed him, with the needed message for the time, to a nation on the verge of destruction with the promise of hope and life. He was the man for the time as no other prophet had been before him; for never was the time so decisive as in his day. His message was in a very deep and true sense for the people to whom he spoke. Of this he himself was profoundly conscious. "I am not sent," he said, "but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel." But he and his words, as had so often come to pass in the case of other of Israel's prophets, were spurned and despised. The last and greatest prophet spoke to his nation and his time in vain.

Fourthly, the aim of Jesus was to fit the nation for the coming of the kingdom of God.

This is already evident from what has been shown in regard to his relation to his nation and his time. It is also made apparent by the account given by Matthew (Matt. 4:17) in relation to the character of the preaching of Jesus at the very beginning of his ministry. According to this testimony, his great theme was "Repent ye; for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." It is not important for the present purpose to consider whether the repentance which Jesus urged was to be a means to hasten the coming of the kingdom of God, or was the necessary condition of sharing in the blessings of its presence. In either

case the great endeavor of Jesus was to fit the lost sheep of the house of Israel for its coming. Nor was such a purpose out of harmony with his wider and larger purpose to be the Savior of the world. For, as he himself declared, "Salvation is from the Jews" (John 4: 22). The world's salvation was to be the result of the establishment and the perfection of the kingdom of God in the world; and Israel was chosen to be the servant of Jehovah, with whom the kingdom of God was to begin, and through whom it was to be perfected. To prepare Israel to serve was, therefore, to begin the salvation of the world. That this preparation was in reality confined to the righteous remnant was only a repetition of what had often been the result of the prophetic work.

Fifthly, Jesus proclaimed the coming of the kingdom of God.

This had been the great work of the prophets of Israel up to his time. The prophet in the people of God was no mere soothsayer, to announce beforehand the coming of an event at a particular time. He might do this occasionally, but it was foreign to the central purpose and work of his ministry. To make this his chief business would have robbed him of all high importance and true spiritual value for the life of the nation. His work was to declare that the kingdom of God was to come, and to teach that it would come whenever men were ready for its coming. He was, therefore, to bid men to prepare the way of Jehovah, and to call them to repentance and righteousness, that the coming of His kingdom might not be delayed. He was to proclaim that this kingdom might be set up in the days of Ahaz, or Hezekiah, or Josiah, or Zerubbabel, but that it could never be established at any time, except upon foundations of goodness and holiness among the people. His words, therefore, were no soothing message allowing spiritual sloth to find comfort in a pious fatalism; but they were a trumpet call to a holy activity.

Jesus took up, in his first preaching, the old prophetic message. The kingdom is coming, he declared; repent ye, therefore. Even if he put a somewhat new meaning upon these

words, and said by them, the time has at last arrived and you must repent in order to share in the blessings of the kingdom sure to come, the old prophetic meaning still remained for all that. For the kingdom could not begin where there were no repentant men; and it could not grow in the world, and advance toward its perfection, faster than men should repent. That Jesus had this ever in mind is shown by the great prophetic prayer he taught his disciples to pray, "Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, as in heaven, so on earth." The coming of God's kingdom will, indeed, assure the doing of God's will by men; but, on the other hand, the kingdom can come only so far and so fast as men do the will of God. Repentance and righteousness alone can answer the prayer which Jesus taught us to pray. So that he proclaimed the coming of the kingdom of God quite in the way of the prophets who preceded him.

Sixthly, Jesus declared the consequences which would follow according as men did, or did not, prepare themselves for the coming of God's kingdom.

To the men of his own time he made known what should be the result of their unwillingness to believe in his gospel of the kingdom. "Ye shall see," he said to them, "Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, and all the prophets, in the kingdom of God, and yourselves cast forth without" (Luke 13 : 28). He also set forth the fate that should befall the rebellious nation, which had rejected every messenger of God, by saying in words of doom, "Therefore, I say unto you, the kingdom of God shall be taken away from you, and shall be given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof" (Matt. 21 : 43). How the fitness and unfitness of individual men of all times shall be followed with consequences, when the kingdom of God shall come in glory, Jesus declared in the words to be found in the well-known passage Matt. 25 : 31-46. These words are but the old prophetic message in louder and clearer tones. They sound not unlike what we may read in the book of one of the oldest of the prophets : "I will command, and I will sift the house of Israel among all the nations, like as corn is sifted in a sieve, yet shall not the least grain fall upon the earth. All the sinners of my people shall

die by the sword, which say, The evil shall not overtake nor prevent us" (Amos 9:9-10).

Thus was Jesus the last and greatest of Israel's prophets. The history of the nation as the covenant people began with the words of God and its first prophet at Sinai; it came to its close with the dying words of its last and greatest prophet, who was also its God, at Calvary.